

Research Highlights

From the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory
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Research conducted for the Virginia HIV Community Planning Committee

Dramatic Differences between White and Black Men Who Have Sex with Men

A recent study of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Virginia found significant differences between White and Black members of the sample in sexual behavior and identity.

Black respondents were more likely to report sex with women than were White men. Blacks were more likely to report that their sexual encounters with other men include anal sex, while Whites more frequently reported oral sex. Blacks were less likely to self-identify as gay or bisexual and less frequently acknowledged their sexuality to others.

These results come from an analysis of 711 surveys completed by Virginia MSM obtained between January and June 1997. The study was conducted by the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory of Virginia Commonwealth University, on behalf of the Virginia HIV Community Planning Committee.

Twenty-eight percent (198 respondents) of the sample is made up of Black men, allowing comparisons with White members of the sample.¹

Methodology

The data were gathered through a complex non-probability sampling process, which included group, in-person, mail and telephone survey administration. Regional data collection managers were responsible for meeting regional sampling targets derived from estimates of the number of MSM in the various regions of the state, given their urban, rural and suburban components.²

¹ Only 48 respondents identified themselves as Hispanic, too few to include in this comparison. Since they also categorized themselves by race, they were placed in either the Black or White group for the purposes of this analysis.

² These estimates were taken from E.O. Laumann, et al, *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Data were gathered in bars, dance clubs, bookstores and restaurants, through organized social, religious, athletic and political groups, and at public gatherings. Posters, advertisements and information cards were placed where appropriate with a toll-free telephone number for phone completion.

In most cases, snowball techniques were used, in which respondents were asked to pass questionnaires or information to others in their social networks.

One goal of the sampling was to obtain interviews with MSM who may not think of themselves as gay or bisexual. The population is not defined by self-identity, but by sexual behavior with other men or at least the interest in such behavior.

About 12 percent of this sample did not self-identify as gay or bisexual, did not express any sexual interest in other men, and said they were exclusively heterosexual. However, most of these completed surveys could be traced to locations or contact points (gay bars, dance clubs, bookstores, organizations) that would indicate these men are indeed part of the MSM population. Therefore, they were kept in the sample as possibly representing the non-gay-identified group of MSM who are critically important to understand for purposes of HIV programming.

Thirteen percent of the sample came from non-urban areas of the state. The age of respondents ranged from 15 to 77 years. Four percent reported they had not completed high school; 24 percent had pursued graduate study. Thirty-eight percent reported incomes under \$20,000 per year while 14 percent reported incomes of more than \$50,000 per year.³

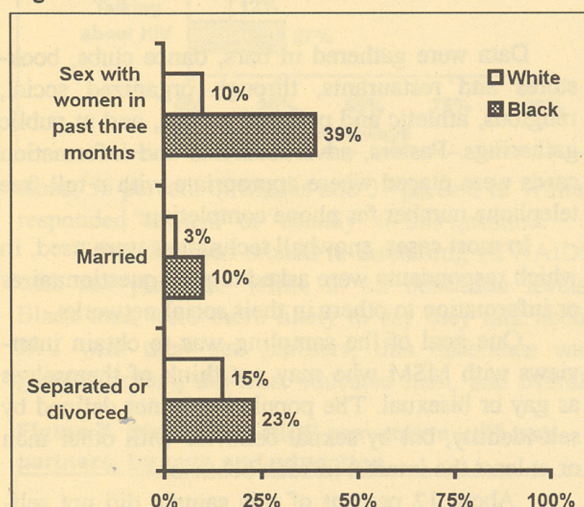
³ Overall results are available from the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory.

Results

Sexual contact with women – Black respondents reported considerably more current and past sexual contact with women than did Whites. Blacks and Whites were about equally likely to say they had been in a relationship during the three months prior to the survey. Of those in a relationship, 44 percent of Blacks said this relationship had been with a woman, compared to nine percent of Whites.

Figure 1 shows that a greater proportion of Black respondents reported sex with a woman in the three months preceding the survey. It also shows that Blacks were more likely to say they were currently married, or were separated or divorced.

Figure 1. Sexual contact with women



Sex with men – White respondents were more likely than Blacks to acknowledge sex with another

The SERL and the HIV Community Planning Committee

The Virginia Commonwealth University Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory, founded in 1982, and incorporated in the university's Center for Public Policy in 1994, serves the university, the community, and local and state government through some 100 projects annually. The SERL also manages a number of large data sets available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

The SERL conducted the survey discussed in this report for the Virginia HIV Community Planning Committee (HCPC), an advisory committee to the Virginia Department of Health. The HCPC includes representatives from communities across Virginia most affected by the epidemic and is responsible for developing an annual HIV prevention plan for Virginia for submission to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For more information about this survey, the SERL, or the HCPC, contact: VCU Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory, PO Box 3016, Richmond, VA 23284-3016. Our telephone is (804) 828-8813, and fax (804) 828-6133. Or visit the SERL on the World Wide Web at <http://www.vcu.edu/srl>.

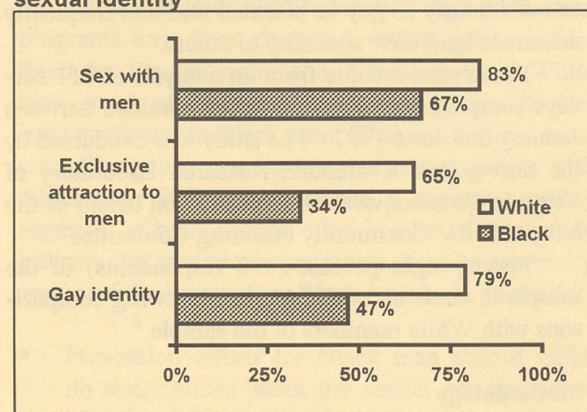
man. Figure 2 shows 83 percent of Whites and 67 percent of Blacks said they had had sex with another man in the previous three months or had ever paid or been paid for sex with another man.⁴

Sexual attraction and identity – Figure 2 also shows Black respondents were less likely than Whites to report exclusive sexual attraction to men and less likely to say they were gay or bisexual.

While 34 percent of Black respondents reported being sexually attracted only to men, 65 percent of Whites reported such exclusivity. Seventeen percent of Blacks compared to eight percent of Whites said they were equally attracted to men and women. Twenty-four percent of Blacks and eight percent of Whites said they were attracted only to women.

Seventy-nine percent of White respondents identified themselves as homosexual or gay, compared to 47 percent of Blacks. Twenty percent of Blacks and 11 percent of Whites identified themselves as bisexual. A quarter of Black respondents said they were heterosexual or straight, compared to eight percent of Whites.

Figure 2. Sex with men, attraction to men, and sexual identity



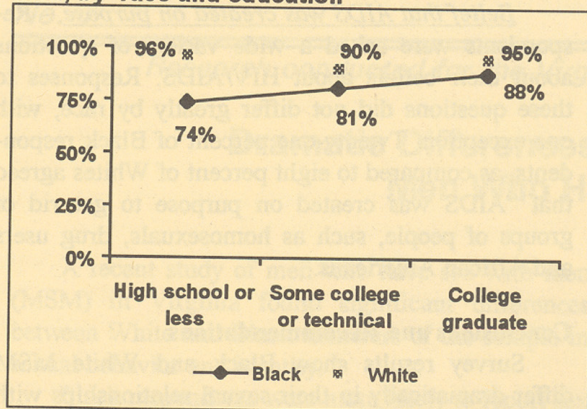
Attraction/Identity/Behavior – When the results of these questions on sexual behavior, attraction and identity are examined together, 94 percent of Whites in this sample and 79 percent of Blacks reported either sex with another man, some degree of sexual attraction to other men, or some degree of gay/bisexual identity.

However, these differences are concentrated in the lower education categories, as shown in Figure 3.

⁴ Since this is a non-probability sample, reporting statistical significance is inappropriate. Such tests are used here as a guide for reporting results. All relationships reported here would be significant at $p = 0.05$ or less if this were a probability sample.

The least educated Black men were less likely than the least educated Whites to indicate attraction to men, sex with men, or gay/bisexual identity. The gap closes considerably as education increases so that college-educated Black men are very similar to college-educated White men in this regard.

Figure 3. Sexual identity, behavior, attraction to men, by race and education



Connections with Other Gay and Bisexual People – Of the respondents who self-identified as gay or bisexual, Blacks were much less likely than Whites to say they had been associated with a gay, lesbian or bisexual organization or to have “come out,” and they reported fewer gay and bisexual friends.

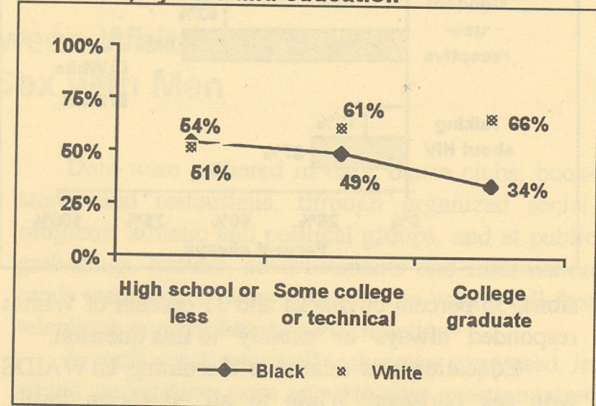
Thirty-five percent of Blacks said they had ever been associated with “a social, political, religious, athletic or support organization or activity made up mostly of gay, lesbian or bisexual people,” compared to 76 percent of Whites. This difference was particularly large among college-educated men.

Forty-five percent of Black respondents and 61 percent of Whites reported that all or most of their closest friends were gay or bisexual. This result is related to education, with the biggest difference occurring within the least educated group, and very little difference among college-educated men.

Finally, as Figure 4 shows, White members of

the sample were much more likely to say they had “come out” to a variety of groups of people. This was highly related to education, however, with less educated Black and White men being very similar in the degree to which they have “come out.” At higher levels of education, Blacks are less likely than Whites to disclose their sexuality. Figure 5 shows disclosure of sexuality to family members by race and education. The pattern is quite similar for dis-

Figure 5. Disclosure of sexuality to family members, by race and education



closure to other groups.

Sexual Behavior and Condom Use – Of Black respondents who had sex with men during the previous three months, 52 percent said their sexual encounters with other men always or usually include anal sex, compared to 31 percent of Whites. Oral sex is more frequent among White respondents, with 76 percent reporting that their sexual encounters with men always or usually include this behavior, compared to 48 percent of Blacks.

Figure 6 shows Blacks reported more frequent condom use than Whites during anal sex. When they were the inserting partner, 62 percent of Blacks reported always using condoms, compared to 47 percent of Whites. When they were the receiving partner, 64 percent of Blacks and 52 percent of Whites said their partners always used condoms.

Figure 4. Percent of self-identified gay and bisexual men who said they were “out” to various groups

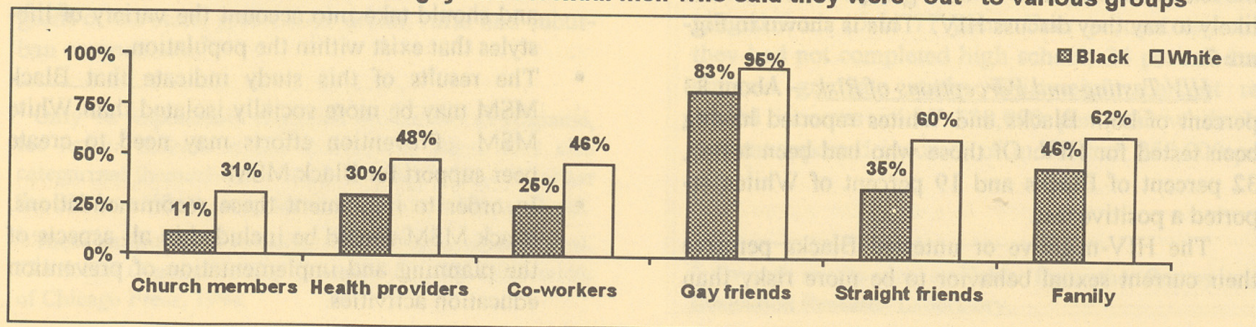
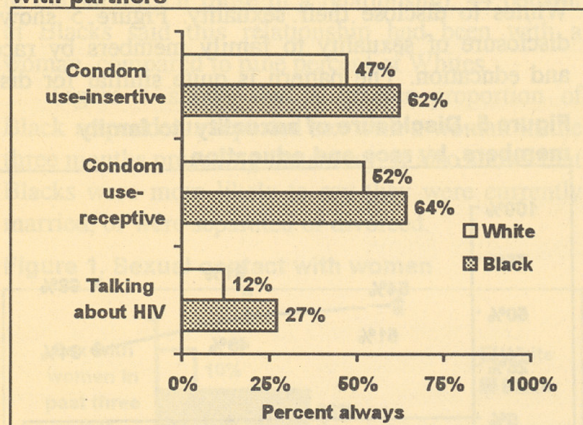


Figure 6 also shows Blacks were more likely than Whites to say they talk with partners about preventing HIV. Twenty-seven percent of Blacks and 12 percent of Whites said they always have such discus-

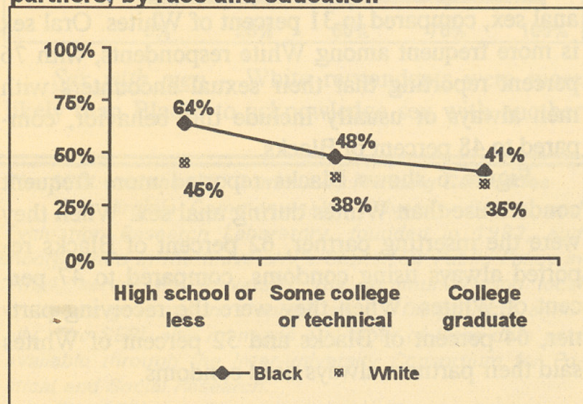
Figure 6. Use of condoms and talking about HIV with partners



sions; 55 percent of Blacks and 37 percent of Whites responded "always" or "usually" to this question.

Education was related to discussing HIV/AIDS with sex partners. While at all education levels, Black men were more likely to say they talk about HIV with their sex partners, this difference was greatest among the least educated men, and overall

Figure 7. Discussing AIDS prevention with sex partners, by race and education



the least educated men of both groups were the most likely to say they discuss HIV. This is shown in Figure 7.

HIV Testing and Perceptions of Risk -- About 83 percent of both Blacks and Whites reported having been tested for HIV. Of those who had been tested, 32 percent of Blacks and 19 percent of Whites reported a positive test.

The HIV-negative or untested Blacks perceive their current sexual behavior to be more risky than

do Whites. A third of Blacks believe their sexual behavior carries a moderate to extreme risk for infecting them with HIV, compared to 15 percent of Whites.

Of respondents who had not been tested, 17 percent of Blacks and 49 percent of Whites said they had not been tested because they know they are not at risk.

Belief that AIDS was created on purpose -- Respondents were asked a wide variety of questions about their beliefs about HIV/AIDS. Responses to these questions did not differ greatly by race, with one exception. Twenty-one percent of Black respondents, as compared to eight percent of Whites agreed that "AIDS was created on purpose to get rid of groups of people, such as homosexuals, drug users and African Americans."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Survey results show Black and White MSM differ dramatically in their sexual relationships with women, in their sexual behavior with other men, in their perceptions of their own sexuality, in the openness with which they express their sexuality, and in their connection to other gay and bisexual people.

To the degree AIDS education and prevention programs have been designed within a context defined by the perceptions and behaviors of White men, much of this effort may be inappropriate and even irrelevant to Black men. This is a critical issue since Blacks are over-represented among people with AIDS and HIV and constitute a rapidly growing segment of both groups. The results of this study indicate that prevention programs must be especially and carefully targeted for Black MSM. In particular:

- Prevention efforts for Black men should make no assumptions about the sexual orientation or identity of the men to which they are presented.
- Given the apparent fear of disclosure of their sexuality on the part of Black men, prevention/education activities should provide "safe places" for such activities.
- Presentations should be culturally appropriate and should take into account the variety of lifestyles that exist within the population.
- The results of this study indicate that Black MSM may be more socially isolated than White MSM. Prevention efforts may need to create peer support for Black MSM.
- In order to implement these recommendations, Black MSM should be included in all aspects of the planning and implementation of prevention education activities.